

Enhancing EFL Learner Engagement in Large Classrooms through Padlet

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ABSTRACT

Engaging students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly large ones, remains a persistent challenge due to rigid structures and limited opportunities for interaction. While gamification is commonly used to boost engagement, its competitive elements can trigger anxiety and hinder participation, especially among less confident learners. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to explore the effectiveness of Padlet—a non-competitive, collaborative digital platform—in promoting student engagement. A total of 202 first-year nursing students participated in a 14-week course in which Padlet was integrated into classroom activities. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Quantitative findings indicated high levels of agreement across five engagement dimensions: motivation, interactivity, learning opportunities, ease of use, and language learning support. Qualitative analysis revealed four dominant themes: Padlet's social media-like appeal, its role in facilitating safe and active collaboration, the creation of an interactive classroom atmosphere, and peer learning through shared content. Students reported increased willingness to participate, reduced anxiety, and greater comfort in expressing ideas. Padlet functioned as a low-anxiety, learner-centered space that encouraged participation, particularly among shy or low-proficiency students. While it may not directly improve language proficiency, its affective benefits foster a positive foundation for language development. Padlet offers an inclusive, psychologically safe alternative to competitive gamification, making it a valuable tool for enhancing student engagement in large EFL classrooms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is widely acknowledged as a key indicator of quality teaching and learning (Chavan, 2015). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, engagement involves both

behavioral participation and cognitive and affective involvement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Engaged learners are more likely to demonstrate curiosity, emotional investment, and meaningful participation, contributing to improved learning outcomes (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Lambert, 2017). Student engagement plays a key role in creating a successful language-learning classroom. It extends to the quantity and quality of active participation and involvement in a task or activity in a language learning class. An engaged student is actively involved, commits to learning, and creates meaningful and responsible learning. Engagement is "a state of heightened attention and involvement, in which participation is reflected" in cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective dimensions (Philp & Duchesne, 2016, p.3). In addition, Zepke and Leach, (2010) stated that social, behavioral, and affective dimensions identify the involvement in learning, pointing out that engagement is a group of interrelated components constituting a multidimensional construct. These three core dimensions are uniquely interrelated, where engaged students manifest their learning behaviourally, demonstrate mental activity through the cognitive process, and show emotional responses to learning tasks and peers (Lambert, 2017).

To enhance engagement, educators have increasingly incorporated gamification—the use of game design elements such as points, levels, and rewards in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011; Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). Popular gamified tools like Kahoot, Quizizz, and Duolingo have been shown to foster motivation, autonomy, and learner satisfaction in EFL settings (Ardi & Rianita, 2022; Hwang et al., 2017; Tilak & Akinkuolie, 2023). These tools often transform classrooms into dynamic learning environments that support immediate feedback and recognition (Rego, 2015; Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

However, the competitive nature of such platforms—often through leaderboards, time-based quizzes, and peer ranking—has raised concerns. While competition may energize some students, it can also induce anxiety, discourage participation from lower-performing learners, and reduce intrinsic motivation (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Saman Ebadi & Mohamadi, 2023)). In large EFL classrooms, these issues are compounded. Students may fear peer judgment, hesitate to participate publicly, or remain silent due to time constraints and limited teacher attention (Ellis, 2015; Fuchs, 2014).

Although gamified learning has been widely adopted, most research has emphasized performance gains and motivation, particularly within competitive contexts (Göksün & Gürsoy, 2019; Wang & Tahir, 2020). There is a lack of exploration into tools that enable students to collaborate, reflect, and share ideas without competition or performance pressure.

Padlet is a gamified tool offering free, paid, virtual-friendly walls that enable real-time class participation. It is similar to sticking sticky notes in a brainstorming class activity using "Post-it" but digitally, where the collected ideas can be shared with the whole class (Fu et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2014). Padlet offers an alternative. It is a virtual, interactive wall that allows learners to post and view content in real time, fostering participation, collaboration, and idea sharing. Its interface resembles physical sticky-note brainstorming, but with features such as anonymity, multimedia support, and layout customization that can help students, especially those in large classes, safely express their thoughts without fear of judgment. Importantly, Padlet supports engagement across behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions without requiring competition or public performance.

While many studies have focused on competitive gamification tools for assessment and performance, few have examined how non-competitive platforms like Padlet support student engagement in large EFL classrooms, particularly in contexts that require inclusive participation and safe expression of ideas. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to 1) explore students' experiences with Padlet in a large EFL classroom and 2) examine how Padlet facilitates student engagement across behavioral, cognitive, and affective domains.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do students experience the use of Padlet in EFL learning in a large class setting?
2. To what extent does Padlet promote student engagement in large EFL classrooms?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the literature on inclusive, engagement-oriented pedagogies in technology-enhanced language learning, offering practical implications for educators seeking to balance participation, equity, and motivation in large classroom environments.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to investigate the impact of Padlet on student engagement in an English language classroom. The research was conducted over a 16-week course in which Padlet served as the primary platform for student participation. The platform enabled students to upload assignments, interact with peers, and receive real-time feedback from instructors, thereby fostering an interactive classroom environment.

The design comprised two phases:

1. Quantitative phase: A survey was administered to 202 first-year nursing students to capture their perceptions of Padlet in promoting participation.
2. Qualitative phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected subset of students to explore the themes that emerged from the survey data in greater depth.

2.2. Participants

A total of 202 first-year nursing students participated in the quantitative phase. For the qualitative phase, seven students were purposively selected based on their highly positive survey responses. These participants were chosen to gain deeper insight into the specific elements of Padlet that effectively supported engagement, motivation, collaboration, and interactivity. The decision to interview seven students was guided by the principle of information-rich cases (Cohen et al., 2018), where smaller, focused samples yield more meaningful data in qualitative inquiry.

2.3. Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection:

- A four-point Likert scale questionnaire, which measured students' views on Padlet's role in enhancing motivation, interactivity, and learning opportunities. The exclusion of a neutral option encouraged decisive responses.
- A semi-structured interview guide, which allowed for open-ended, in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perspectives.

Content validity of the instruments was ensured through expert review by two native English-speaking professionals with experience in language education. Their feedback helped refine the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the questionnaire and interview items (Llorente-Cejudo & Almenara, 2013).

2.4. Procedures

During the course, Padlet was systematically integrated into weekly activities, functioning as a collaborative and reflective space for students. After administering the survey, students with notably positive responses were invited for follow-up interviews. These interviews expanded on survey findings, offering qualitative depth to the quantitative trends identified.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee before data collection. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Written informed consent was secured from all students, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

2.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS software to identify trends and patterns in student engagement. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to assess overall perceptions of Padlet use. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to extract recurring themes related to student engagement, motivation, collaboration, and perceived learning benefits. This triangulation strengthened the study's findings by offering breadth and depth in understanding how Padlet influenced classroom dynamics.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Quantitative Findings: Students' experience in using Padlet

The statistical analysis results were organized around five key aspects of students' experiences using Padlet, as reported in the questionnaire completed by 139 nursing students in a large EFL class. The table illustrates the percentage breakdown for each aspect: motivation and collaboration, interactivity, learning opportunities, ease of use, and English language learning.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Padlet Use Across Five Engagement Dimensions

Items	Strongly Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly Agree n (%)	Mean	SD	Total (%)
Motivation and collaboration							
Padlet motivates me to complete tasks assigned by my instructor	0	0	45 (22.3%)	157 (77.7%)	3,78	0,471	
Padlet motivates me to interact with my group members outside of class.	0	0	46 (22.8%)	158 (77.2%)	3,77	0,42	94,31
Padlet motivates to post something in my class member' post	2 (1%)	1 (0.5%)	39 (19.3)	160 (79.2)	3,77	0,499	
Interactivity							
When the lecturer asks a question in class, I can share my views using Padlet without having to reply out loud	0	0	53 (26.2%)	149 (73.8%)	3,74	0,441	
When using Padlet for group activities, I feel less stress	0	4 (2%)	42 (20.8%)	156 (77.2%)	3,75	0,476	93,42
After using Padlet, I was more engaged in my learning	0	3 (1.5%)	42 (20.8%)	157 (77.7%)	3,76	0,46	
I like using Padlet because I can share my views without giving my name	0	4 (2%)	45 (22.3%)	153 (75.7%)	3,74	0,484	

I like using Padlet because making mistakes becomes less threatening and embarrassing.	0	4 (2%)	54 (26.7)	144 (71.3%)	3,69	0,504	
Learning Opportunity							
Padlet allows me to learn from my classmates by reading their posts and comments on our class wall.	0	2 (1%)	49 (24.3%)	151 (74.8%)	3,74	0,463	
Using Padlet helps me to prepare for my independent learning in the subject	0	0	60 (29.7%)	142 (70.03)	3,7	0,458	93,04
Padlet helps me to learn and understand further general English based on the exercise given	0	2 (1%)	56 (27.7%)	144 (71.3%)	3,7	0,479	
Padlet helps me effectively in learning about subjects as I can see my friends' progress	0	2 (1%)	48 (23.8%)	152 (75.2%)	3,74	0,46	
Ease of use							
Padlet is easy to use and has an attractive layout	0	4 (2%)	43 (21.3%)	155 (76.7%)	3,75	0,479	
Accessing Padlet to post the task and comment on classmates' posts is easy	0	3 (1.5%)	53 (26.2%)	146 (72.3%)	3,71	0,487	92,82
Padlet can be used without reading instruction	0	4 (2%)	56 (27.7%)	142 (70.3%)	3,68	0,507	
Learning English							
I experience progress in my English after using Padlet	0	3 (1.5%)	50 (24.8%)	149 (73.8%)	3,72	0,481	93,44
Padlet improve my writing skills	0	3 (1.5%)	44 (21.8%)	155 (76.7%)	3,75	0,466	

Table 2. Mean score of each theme

Category	Mean	SD
Motivation & Collaboration	3.77	0.46
Interactivity	3.73	0.47
Learning Opportunity	3.72	0.46
Ease of Use	3.71	0.49
English Language Learning	3.74	0.47

The study revealed that most students found Padlet highly motivating and beneficial for collaboration. A large majority (around 77%) strongly agreed that Padlet encouraged them to complete assignments, interact, and respond to peers' posts. Although motivation was widely reported, a small minority (1%) strongly disagreed about its usefulness in engaging with classmates' posts. In terms of interactivity, over 70% of students felt that Padlet helped them express opinions, study with less pressure, interact freely, maintain privacy, and feel less embarrassed when making mistakes. Only a small proportion (less than 3%) disagreed with these benefits. Regarding learning opportunities, most students (around 70–75%) strongly agreed that Padlet enhanced their understanding of the course, supported self-study, and allowed them to learn more effectively by reading classmates' posts. For ease

of use, over 70% of respondents found Padlet visually appealing, user-friendly, and easy to navigate without needing a guide. A few students (less than 4%) found using it less engaging or challenging. Most students (around 74–77%) reported progress in improving English skills, with Padlet aiding their reading, writing, and listening skills.

3.2. Qualitative Findings: Engagement and Perceptions in EFL class

The results of the reflective semi-structured interview were analyzed. The results were categorized into four main themes based on the data coding. The four established themes include Padlet unfamiliarity, Safe and active collaboration, interactive atmosphere, and peer learning. The results of the content analysis were summarized and presented below.

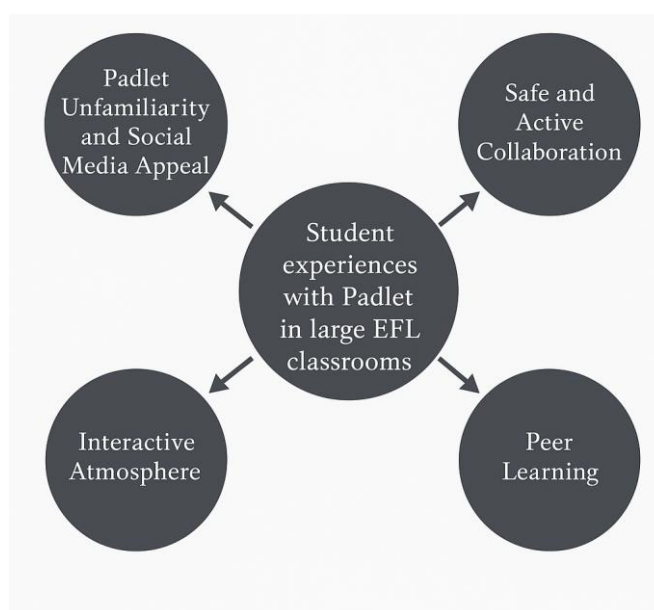


Figure 1. The four emerging themes

3.2.1. Padlet unfamiliarity and Social Media appeal (Linked to RQ1)

Although Padlet was unfamiliar to most students, they quickly adapted to it and compared it to popular social media platforms. They found it enjoyable and easy to use, contributing positively to their EFL learning experience in a large class. Padlet's similarity to social platforms lowered the barrier to participation and increased their comfort in expressing ideas. *"I only got to know Padlet when learning this course."*

"I only got to know Padlet when learning this course."

"It feels easy to speak my mind like playing social media in general. It makes learning fun."

Despite initial unfamiliarity, students appreciated the opportunity to interact and respond freely. The design and interface of Padlet helped create a less formal, more inviting learning space.

3.2.2. Safe and active collaboration (Linked to RQ1 and RQ2)

Students emphasized that Padlet provided a safe environment to participate, especially for those who were shy or less confident in their English. The ability to post anonymously or asynchronously gave them space to engage without the fear of judgment, often associated with face-to-face interactions.

"Through Padlet, I mustered my courage to comment on the topics and express my voice."

"Padlet made the difference by allowing us to express ourselves in English without having to fear that people would stare at us."

This sense of emotional safety significantly increased their willingness to collaborate and contribute. Students who previously remained silent in class felt empowered to speak up.

3.2.3. Interactive atmosphere (Linked to RQ2)

Students reported that Padlet fostered an interactive environment, with peers and instructors actively engaging through comments. This back-and-forth dialogue encouraged ongoing involvement and made the learning process feel dynamic rather than test-driven.

"Very helpful to send comments and get replies from friends."

"Discussion is made easy."

The asynchronous nature of Padlet allowed students to take their time crafting responses, which was especially beneficial in large classes where real-time verbal interaction can be overwhelming or limited.

3.2.4. Peer-learning (Linked RQ1 and RQ2)

The opportunity to read others' posts and provide feedback contributed to meaningful peer learning. Students noted that Padlet helped them see different task approaches and boosted their understanding of content.

"Padlet helped me understand the concept that I have not understood yet because I could see how my friends have made theirs."

"I am given more time to see how my friends approach the questions and made mine."

While students acknowledged that Padlet alone may not drastically improve English proficiency, it contributed to vocabulary enrichment and critical thinking by exposing them to diverse perspectives. The collaborative tasks and mutual feedback enhanced both individual and group engagement.

"I do not think my English improved significantly in learning English, but I can learn more new words from my friends' posts."

"I do not think my English improved significantly, but I can learn more new words from my friends' posts."

Discussion

This study explored nursing students' experiences using Padlet in a large EFL class of 202 students. Over 14 meetings, Padlet was integrated alongside the learning management system to foster interaction, expression, and collaboration. The findings from reflective interviews and quantitative data suggest that Padlet helped create a psychologically safe environment conducive to student engagement, particularly for less confident learners.

Four themes emerged: Padlet Unfamiliarity, Safe and Active Collaboration, Interactive Atmosphere, and Peer Learning. While students were initially unfamiliar with Padlet, they quickly appreciated its features, especially the ability to interact anonymously, significantly reducing anxiety. Padlet became a low-stakes, gamified space where students could express opinions without fear of judgment, aligning with (Krashen, 1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that low-anxiety environments enhance language acquisition.

The sense of community and peer learning reflects social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), wherein knowledge is constructed through interaction and scaffolding. Students reported learning from one another's responses and feedback. However, despite high levels of engagement, students

perceived limited gains in language proficiency, suggesting that emotional engagement may precede measurable linguistic improvement.

These findings align with earlier studies showing Padlet's effectiveness in fostering collaboration, engagement, and learner autonomy. (Ellis, 2015; Fisher, 2017; Fuchs, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2020). Prior research also emphasizes the tool's role in creating inclusive learning environments where shy or lower-proficiency students can participate meaningfully. (Lailatur Rofiah et al., 2024). However, this study nuances previous findings by challenging the assumption that gamification via competition is universally motivating. Contrary to Dehghanzadeh and Noroozi (2021) and Fu et al. (2021), who found that competitive gamified tools enhance learning outcomes, this study suggests that competition may alienate lower-proficiency learners in large classes. Instead, anonymous collaboration and inclusive participation, as enabled by Padlet, are more suitable for such contexts.

The findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive gamification in EFL instruction. Teachers should balance competition with collaboration, carefully considering student proficiency levels, classroom size, and emotional readiness. Padlet offers a powerful tool for inclusive participation, especially when anonymity is preserved. Moreover, instructors should view engagement as multifaceted, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engaging students in a fun and safe environment is a prerequisite to deeper language learning. While students may not immediately perceive language gains, their affective readiness paves the way for long-term improvement.

While this study offers valuable insights into how Padlet facilitates engagement and collaboration in large EFL classes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported experiences through reflective interviews may introduce subjective bias, as participants may provide socially desirable responses or may not fully recall their engagement behaviors. Second, the study did not include pre- and post-tests to measure actual improvements in English proficiency. As a result, although students reported greater engagement and comfort, the impact on language development remains unclear. Third, the absence of a control group limits the ability to compare Padlet's effectiveness with other instructional tools or traditional methods. These factors constrain the generalizability of the findings and call for caution in drawing strong causal conclusions. Future studies with more controlled designs, objective learning measures, and mixed-method approaches would strengthen the evidence base.

Beyond promoting engagement, teachers can use Padlet to support language development more purposefully. For example, instructors might integrate targeted language tasks, such as vocabulary usage challenges, collaborative grammar correction activities, or structured peer feedback on writing, to deepen linguistic focus. Using Padlet's multimedia functions, students could post short audio or video reflections to practice productive skills like speaking and pronunciation in a low-anxiety environment. Teachers could also scaffold academic writing by asking students to draft thesis statements or topic sentences for peer review. Educators should align Padlet activities with specific language learning outcomes to move beyond engagement and foster measurable skill development. In this way, Padlet becomes a space for safe expression and a platform for intentional, communicative language practice.

4. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research on digital tools in EFL classrooms by highlighting how Padlet fosters engagement, collaboration, and a sense of psychological safety among nursing students in a large-class context. Its interactive and user-friendly interface, real-time communication, and anonymous posting features allowed learners of varying proficiency levels to participate without fear of judgment. The findings underscore Padlet's practical value for educators seeking inclusive, low-anxiety platforms that support reflection, peer learning, and interaction,

especially in large, mixed-ability classrooms. Padlet aligns with pedagogical approaches grounded in affective and social constructivist theories by prioritizing emotional safety and equitable participation. This research suggests that when implemented intentionally, digital tools like Padlet can enhance classroom engagement. Moving forward, this study informs future EFL digital pedagogy by emphasizing the need for tools that balance structure, flexibility, and competition with collaboration. As digital platforms continue to shape language learning environments, educators are encouraged to design learner-centered, context-aware strategies that engage and empower students in their language development journey.

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